

Essays on the Economic and Political Effects of Migration

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The three chapters of this thesis aim to better understand the determinants and consequences of attitudes towards immigration. It explores how direct exposure to migration, such as refugee inflows into cities, or indirect exposure to migration, such as through the media, influences natives' preferences. It also investigates the political and economic consequences of natives' changing attitudes about immigration.

The first chapter, co-authored with Jérôme Valette, examines the extent to which media can influence immigration opinions by altering the topic's salience or framing. We exploit highly precise data on newscasts of major French television channels and individual panel data to show that, contrary to prior evidence, an increase in the salience of immigration does not necessarily deteriorate natives' attitudes, but rather enhances their polarization by pushing those with moderate beliefs toward the two extremes of the attitude distribution. We also show that discussing immigration in foreign host nations (such as Germany or the US) enhances support for immigration among French nationals, while debates over immigrants' integration in France are systematically associated with an increase in polarization. Moreover, after controlling for immigration's salience, we demonstrate that the presence of more negative content is associated with an increase in anti-immigration attitudes, whilst the presence of more positive content tends to boost pro-immigration attitudes. Thus, unlike the salience of immigration, this analysis also indicates that framing mostly drives attitudes in very specific directions.

The second chapter assesses the effect of refugee exposure on natives' political preferences for the far-right. Using a difference-in-difference estimation strategy in a staggered adoption design based on the latest econometrics advances, I show that opening a refugee center reduces far-right voting by about 2 percent. This negative effect is not due to an economic or amenity shock, but rather to a composition channel, as a result of natives' segregation, and a contact channel, as a result of natives' contact with refugees. In particular, it deters marginal far-right voters to start voting for the far-right. However, while the contact channel is at play, I show that too-disruptive contact with refugees, as measured by the magnitude of inflows, cultural distance, and media attention given to refugees, can mitigate contact's beneficial effects on reducing far-right support. This allows reconciling the conflicting findings in the literature by emphasizing the role of certain factors that may cause the far-right vote to shift to one side or the other in response to refugee exposure.

The third chapter investigates how natives react to the opening of a refugee center. Using administrative data and an event-by-event analysis, we demonstrate that the opening of a refugee center results in a one- to two-percentage-point decrease in population. We demonstrate that this is due to a decline in the number of people moving into these host municipalities, not to a departure of the locals. Native populations' avoidance behavior is motivated by prejudice, as we demonstrate that the competition channel is unlikely, not just because refugee inflows are negligible at the local level, but also because we find no evidence of a labor market impact on natives or of an effect on crime, and that working and retiree populations are affected in the same way. Because lower inflows of natives to hosting municipalities mean fewer customers and taxpayers, we show that this reallocation of the native population has an aggregate cost and a negative impact on local economic activity and municipal revenues. This chapter thus illustrates how natives' negative attitudes towards immigration and their segregation reaction can result in costly economic inefficiencies.